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## Myth 15: High-Ability Students Don't Face Problems and Challenges

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One rationale for failure to address the needs of high-ability students in schools is that high-ability students do not need special services because they do not face any special problems or challenges. A more extreme corollary of this attitude is the notion that high ability is so protective that students with high ability do not face problems or challenges that other students do, or that they will be successful in life no matter what they experience in school. This myth is closely related to the myth that high-ability students do not have unique social and/or emotional needs (see Myth 17). Peterson argues persuasively in Myth 17 that gifted students face many problems and challenges in the social/emotional realm. Here, the focus is on whether high-ability students face problems and challenges in developing their talents. Myths 15 and 17 should be read together to get a complete picture of the problems and challenges that high-ability students face.

### Origins and Attractions of the Myth

The myth that high-ability students do not face problems and challenges is an attractive one for school personnel. If the myth is true, teachers, principals, and superintendents have no responsibility to recognize the existence of this special population of students or to attempt to address their needs. Accountability legislation such as No Child Left Behind has led to an emphasis on addressing the needs of struggling learners. Because both human and material resources are limited, the focus on lifting the bottom quartile of students leaves teachers with little time and energy for appropriate education for high-ability students. If the myth is true, this benign neglect is a not a problem.

Another factor that contributes to this myth is that many high-ability students enjoy school, have high self-efficacy for school tasks, and appear to find it

quite easy to achieve at levels beyond most of their chronological peers. The success of these students hides the problems and challenges they face. For example, high-ability students in unchallenging educational environments may look problem-free because they are performing above grade level, when, in fact, they are developing maladaptive motivational beliefs that will sabotage their resilience when they encounter more challenging coursework in the future.

Factors that can support the myth in families include (a) lack of information about giftedness, (b) denial of parental giftedness, and (c) concerns about the resources and/or family adaptations that might be required to support talent development in a high-ability child. In other words, the myth can be attractive to some parents because it reduces burdens and anxieties related to parenting a gifted child.

Policy makers find the myth attractive because it simplifies resource-allocation dilemmas. If high-ability students do not have problems, they do not need funding or legislative priority. The long-standing dichotomy in programs for exceptional children fuels the myth. Historically, the United States has spent far more money on children with handicapping conditions than on children with special talents. Gifted children are the "only category of exceptional children for whom we seriously question whether we should provide special services" (Gallagher, 1991, p. 14). Why? Much of our society believes in the concept of vertical equity: the unequal treatment of unequals to make them more equal (Gallagher, 1991). This is the prevailing philosophy behind the No Child Left Behind legislation. It is difficult for a "cold" issue such as the development of talent or waste of potential

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to compete with “hot” issues such as the widespread failure of American schools to provide minimally acceptable education for English language learners. The myth that high-ability youth have no problems makes it easier for politicians to ignore them as a special population with special needs when faced with the difficult task of allocating scarce resources.

## **Alternatives: Myth Debunked**

### **Problems and Challenges Faced by Most High-Ability Youth**

In elementary school, the problems and challenges that high-ability youth experience with academic achievement and motivation depend in large measure on the educational environments they experience. If they are placed in educational environments that are adapted to low- or average-ability same-age learners, they are likely to experience boredom, frustration, and decreased motivation (Robinson, Reis, Neihart, & Moon, 2002). One of the developmental tasks of the elementary school years is the development of industriousness. It is difficult to accomplish this developmental task when academic work is too easy. High-ability students placed in heterogeneous classrooms develop maladaptive beliefs about ability and effort, and the relationship between them, that can make it impossible for them to engage in the hard work required to turn raw ability into fully honed talents later in life. If, on the other hand, high-ability students are fortunate enough to experience an appropriate educational environment that provides developmentally appropriate challenges and encourages them to fully develop their academic talents, the likelihood of problems and challenges related to their giftedness during the elementary school years is lessened.

At the secondary level, high-ability students face the same dilemmas as elementary students if they do not experience appropriate challenges. However, the nature of the secondary curriculum, especially in the latter years of high school, is such that the content of secondary courses is challenging for many high-ability students. Hence, by the end of high school, lack of challenge is usually somewhat less of an issue. However, at this level, new problems tend to surface, and the nature of those problems tends to be shaped by the interaction of the school environment and the talent profile of the students. If a student has exceptional talent in one area, such as mathematics, the key challenge may be what to do when the resources of

the high school for the development of that talent have been exhausted. This issue is especially acute in low-resource environments such as rural schools and high-poverty schools. Other highly able students face new problems because of the competing demands on their time. Students who have interests and abilities in multiple areas, for instance, sports, drama, science, and photography face time-management dilemmas that may exceed their coping abilities. For example, some gifted high school students sacrifice sleep to fit in all of their activities, a strategy that can work in the short term but is unlikely to be effective in the long term. In other words, high ability creates pressures and stressors that can overwhelm high-ability students and prevent them from fulfilling their potential.

### **Special Populations**

In addition, there are several subpopulations of high-ability students that face more extreme problems and challenges in developing their talents. For example, numerous studies document problems of highly intellectually gifted students in finding educational and social environments that foster appropriate academic development. Similarly, there are few school provisions for creatively or spatially gifted students, so they are likely to have problems understanding and developing their talents.

High-ability students of color and gifted females face stereotype threats to talent development, which arise from the social context in which students live and can have negative effects on academic achievement. For example, stereotype threats can lower performance on standardized tests, truncate career options, and cause high-ability students to drop out of challenging classes. Both groups also face antiachievement peer pressure and may choose to resolve that pressure by failing to develop their academic potential so that they can fit in with their less academic friends.

Perhaps the most at-risk subpopulation of gifted students is the twice-exceptional. These students face difficult problems and challenges throughout their schooling that make it difficult for them to be successful academically, much less to fully develop their talents. One of the first challenges is accurate identification. Many twice-exceptional students are not identified in the elementary school years. In addition, twice-exceptional students tend to experience more frustration and lower self-efficacy for school tasks than either average-ability students with disabilities or high-ability students without disabilities, and both these factors are associated with underachievement.

Their school performance may be hindered further by disruptive or antisocial behavior; these same behaviors reduce their opportunities to participate in accelerated options for high-ability students.

### Alternatives: Life Without the Myth

In summary, high-ability students do face problems and challenges. The nature of the problems and challenges they face lead to several recommendations:

- First, and most important, high-ability students need an appropriately challenging and supportive educational environment where the instruction is within their zone of proximal development—neither too easy, nor too hard.
- In addition, they need an educational climate that supports high-level academic achievement, actively eliminates stereotypes that limit aspirations, and includes peers that applaud academic achievements.
- Finally, they need advocates who work tirelessly to ensure that supportive policies are in place to meet their needs at the federal, state, and local levels.

In addition to these general recommendations, much work needs to be done to address the problems and challenges of various at-risk subgroups of high-ability youth, such as the twice-exceptional, students of color, students in high-poverty communities, and

the creatively or spatially gifted. These special-needs populations need targeted programming to fulfill their potential. In summary, high-ability youth do face problems and challenges in developing their academic potential, but many of their challenges can be addressed if policy makers and school personnel ensure that they receive appropriately challenging instruction and experience supportive educational climates throughout their P-16 experience.

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